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ABSTRACT

For educators to effectively meet the needs of at-risk nontraditional college students, they must quickly identify such students, utilize the best available teaching techniques, and work to guarantee student retention. Swift identification of potential at-risk students depends on educators' awareness of common indicators, such as the student having been out of school for more than five years; having five or more conflicting social roles (i.e., student, breadwinner, homemaker, parent of young children, and care giver for an elderly family member); returning to school because of a recent layoff, not because of a desire to be educated; and having a first language other than English which might affect understanding and communication. An effective instructional strategy for students identified as at-risk is cooperative learning, or the use of small groups of students working together to maximize learning. Cooperative learning groups may be informal and focus on the material of a particular class, or long-term, meeting daily throughout a term to provide support to members. Advantages for at-risk students include increased opportunities to participate in the smaller groups, development of positive social skills, positive effects on students' self-esteem, experience with teamwork, and a sense of positive interdependence with other group members. Finally, the use of small groups allows for more personal interaction between teachers and students which can increase the academic integration of at-risk students and reduce the probability of withdrawal. (MAB)

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At Risk Non-Traditional

Community College Students

Submitted
by

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At Risk Non-Traditional Community College Students

The Nontraditional college students have been referred by many researchers as being mysterious. It has been suggested by Cross (1971) that only in an open door admission college would they be considered college material. Presently, community colleges are experiencing an increase in the number of "at risk nontraditional college students." Many of these students can be defined as being on the border line of failure in an open door democratic institution known as the community college. Current researchers have focused on the positive aspects of nontraditional students as being the best students (Jacobs, 1989, Ferree, 1985; and others). However, it should be noted that there are a group of nontraditional students who are at risk of failure in the community college. The question becomes how can we as educators make sure each at risk nontraditional community college student is well served in an efficient,effective manner.

First, we need to be able to quickly identify our at risk nontraditional college student. Next, we need to be able to meet that student population by finding the best available teaching technique. Lastly retention is the goal. We need to make sure the at risk- nontraditional community college student achieves his or her educational goals successfully.

In essence, I will discuss ways I have found useful in identifying the at risk nontraditional community college student. Secondly, I will focus on the best teaching technique that should be used for effective community college teaching. Lastly, I will discuss the retention of "at-risk" nontraditional community college students.

. . **Identifying the at-risk Nontraditional Community College Student(See Table one)**

There are several techniques that are helpful in identifying at risk nontraditional community college students. First, the instructor will have each student fill out an index card on the first day of school. On this card a person will answer the question "How long has it been since you have been in a classroom situation?" The answer to this question will inform the instructor that this particular individual may be in the adjustment stage of reorienting himself or herself as a student. If a student has been out of school for 5 years or more this will be a signal to the instructor that this student may be a **potential** at-risk nontraditional student. Secondly, if a student also suggests that he or she has 5 or more social roles this can assist the instructor in knowing that this individual is experiencing potential role conflicts. For example, a student with 2 part time jobs, a 15 hour credit load, 2 children, a husband and a sick mother at home. This person would be a **Potential** at risk nontraditional student. Thirdly, from observation "at risk nontraditional community college students are usually ear bound students. Specifically, they never participate in class discussion and they refuse to do oral presentations.

Another indicator of a potential "at-Risk nontraditional student is a person returning to school as a result of unemployment or a job lost. This persons confidence level might be at a all time high because of a job lost. Many students returning under these circumstances may feel like their educational involvement might not help their circumstances. For example, one student asked me if I thought he would get a job after he finished learning this information. I tried to give examples of people working in the field that he was pursing. As a result, this encouraged the student to have courage to continue his studies in a positive viewpoint with hope for the future.

(Table One)

Identifying "At-Risk"

Non-Traditional

Community College Students

*Fill out index card letting the student tell some things about himself or herself

1. How long has it been since you have been in a classroom situation?

2. Are you returning to school because of a recent layoff?

3. How many social roles do you have?

4. Is English you first language?

Red Flag Signals

1. Out of school more than 5 years

2. Three or more Social Roles

3. Returning to school because of a recent layoff and not because of a desire to be educated

4. English is not the 1st language and they don't understand your lectures

It should be noted that not all students will fall into the category of "at risk-Nontraditional community college students." However, there are some red flag signals that an instructor should use in helping to identify potential "at=risk" nontraditional community college students.

Best teaching techniques for "at Risk Nontraditional Community College Students

There are many techniques that have been suggested as being the best method of teaching non=traditional community college students. The teaching method that I have found most effective is cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so students work together to maximize their own and each others learning. There are three types of cooperative learning that are identified as being successful in a classroom. Informal cooperative learning groups the instructor structures the groups by determine the group size and who is assigned to the group. *The instructor monitors the learning groups functioning, assist in answering appropriate questions, and evaluates the students learning (Johnson, 1986)

The second type of cooperative learning is informal cooperative learning. In this group setting the focus is on the material to be learned during a particular class session. Usually 3-5 minutes discussion in groups can be interspersed though a lecture (Johnson, 1986).

The third type of cooperative groups are based groups. Base groups meet daily and they are usually long term groups that provide caring and support to the members. They influence group members to work hard in college. This presentation will focus on the formal cooperative group setting (Johnson, 1986).

Johnson (1986) conclude that the most effective method of teaching is students teaching other students. "Cooperative Learning promotes higher achievement than competitive and individualistic learning structures across all age level, subject areas, and almost all tasks" (Kagan, 1989).

I have found several basic reasons that cooperative learning should be implemented in all classes where instructors have identified "at risk nontraditional community college students. First of all, in a traditional classroom, instructors usually stand behind a podium. When discussion occurs it is frequently teacher directed and teacher focused. In classrooms using cooperative small group work, the emphasis change, and the instructor becomes the guide by the side. Cooperative learning enables the instructor to obtain feedback while circulating among small groups, hearing students comments, and answering students questions. This enables the instructor to increase his or her knowledge of whether or not the class is understanding. Also, the individual student who has problems comprehending will be able to seek feedback from their instructor. One advantage is the fact that the group is smaller and less formal. Thus, a nontraditional at risk student may feel more comfortable asking questions or additional clarifications on an issue. For example, stone, (1970) surveyed over 1000 college students and reported that 60% of the students said the presence of a large number of people would deter them from asking questions, even if the instructor encouraged them to do so. This student feedback gives the instructor information to improve his or her teaching methods.

Secondly, cooperative learning emphasizes peer tutoring, collaborative learning and positive social skills. The opportunity to be exposed to other students ideas rather than the instructor is important for promoting cognitive development. Cooperative learning helps students advance to the next level of cognitive development. For example, the first stage that Perry (1970) stated that entering college students face is characterized by

1. Students come to college seeing the world in terms of right and wrong. Right answers are absolute and known by an authority such as a teacher whose job is to teach them the absolute truth.

2. Students see as bothersome multiple viewpoints and diversity of opinions because they represent confusion.

Cooperative learning encourages the growth of cognitive development in the most advanced stages. Thus, this reduces the idea that the teacher is the sole authority; and students are exposed to the ideas of others students.

Thirdly, many at risk nontraditional community college students have low self esteems. Many at risk nontraditional community college students perceive the following factors to be barriers to college: being older than other students, tuition, bad prior academic record, feeling rejected by the classmates and professors, balancing job, school and family responsibilities (Gallay and Hunter, 1978; Kimmel and Murphy, 1976, Rawlins, 1979). It has been found that cooperative learning has a positive effect on the self esteem of the student. The fact that cooperative learning is learning centered this gives the student some decision making opportunities. As a result of increasing the students decision making opportunities in the classroom, the student will feel more positive toward the subject matter and themselves in general.

Fourthly, in the age of competition in the work force, team work is an important asset to gain. Cooperative learning allows the at risk non traditional community college student the opportunity to gain such experience. It allows the student to work with others on a task in pursuit of a common goal. This helps the student to develop skills such as leadership skills, empathy, listening, consensus building and constructive management.

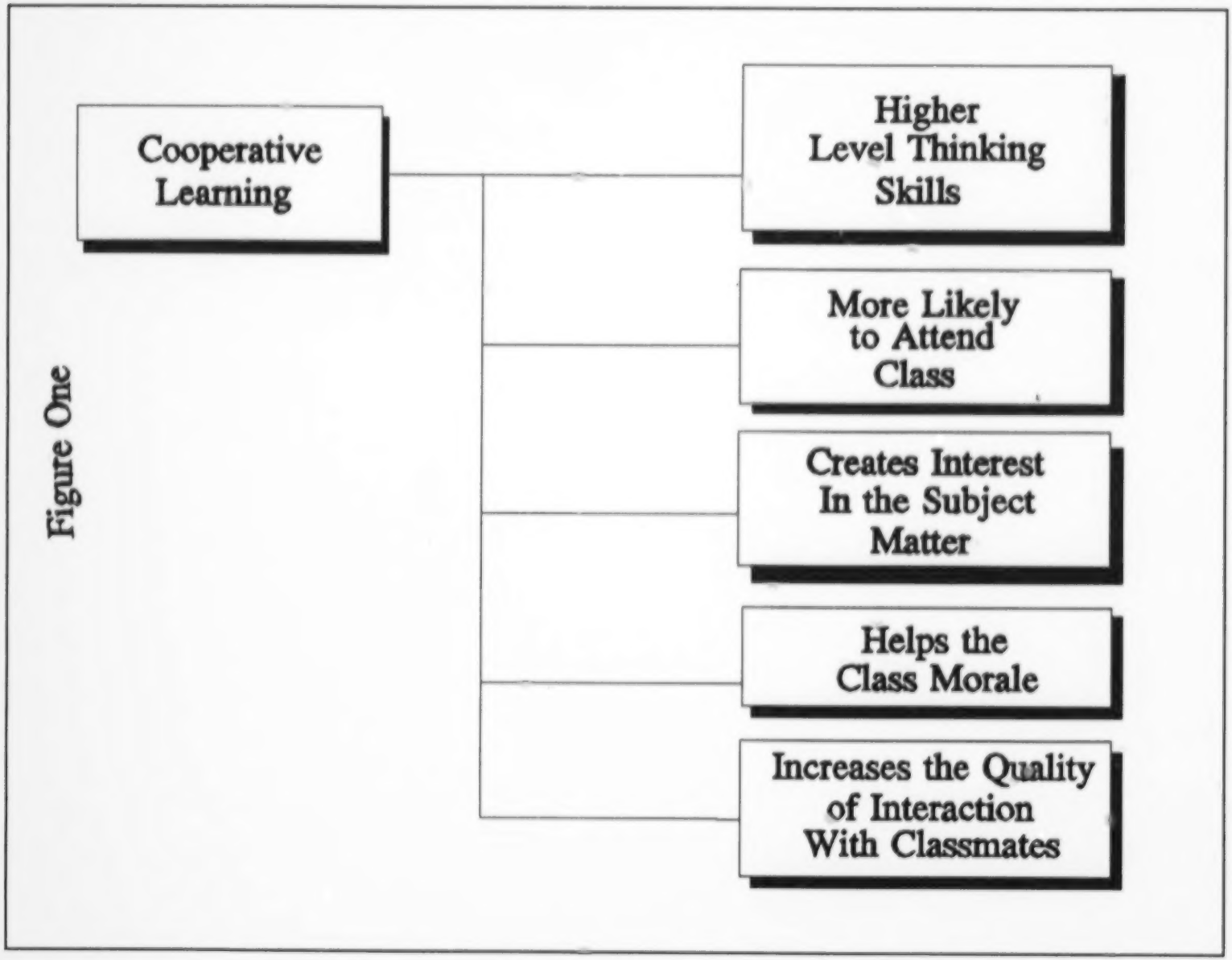
Cooperative Learning
Higher Level Thinking Skills
More Likely to Attend Class
Creates Interest In the Subject Matter
Helps the Class Morale
Increases the Quality of Interaction With Classmates

Figure One

Next, some at risk non-traditional community college students experience "communication apprehension". Many times they are afraid to talk in class because what they may say might be considered wrong. This problem can be reduced if students are given the opportunity to express themselves in a comfortable social context of a small group. Later, they many feel more comfortable talking with a larger group present.

Also, cooperative learning encourages positive interdependence. One of the first requirement for an effectively structured cooperative lesson is that students believe that they sink or swim together (Johnson, 1986). Positive interdependence exist when students perceive that they are linked with other members of the group in a way that they cannot succeed unless the other members do.

Student Retention

Opportunities for the instructor to visit the small groups during cooperative learning may allow for more informal, intimate interaction between the instructor and students. If the college experience is desirable students are more likely to stay in college than if they are not satisfied with their learning experience. Cooperative learning allows for significant amounts of meaningful student discussion that will help the at risk nontraditional community college student have a meaningful learning experience that enhances their satisfaction and promotes student retention.

In applying Tinto's (1975) theoretical model of student attrition to non-traditional students the focus is changed. Tinto's Model emphasized integration and commitment. Some of the students background characteristics (family background, individual attributes and high school experience) tend to interact with each other and influence student's commitment to the goal of college completion. These commitments, in turn influence grade performance, intellectual development which determines academic integration. In other words increased academic integration that cooperative learning provides will lead to social integration and goal commitment. Thus, this will reduce the probability of "at risk nontraditional students dropping out of the system of higher education. As a result, we will be more effective in reducing the number of at risk nontraditional community college students and be more effective in our jobs as teachers.

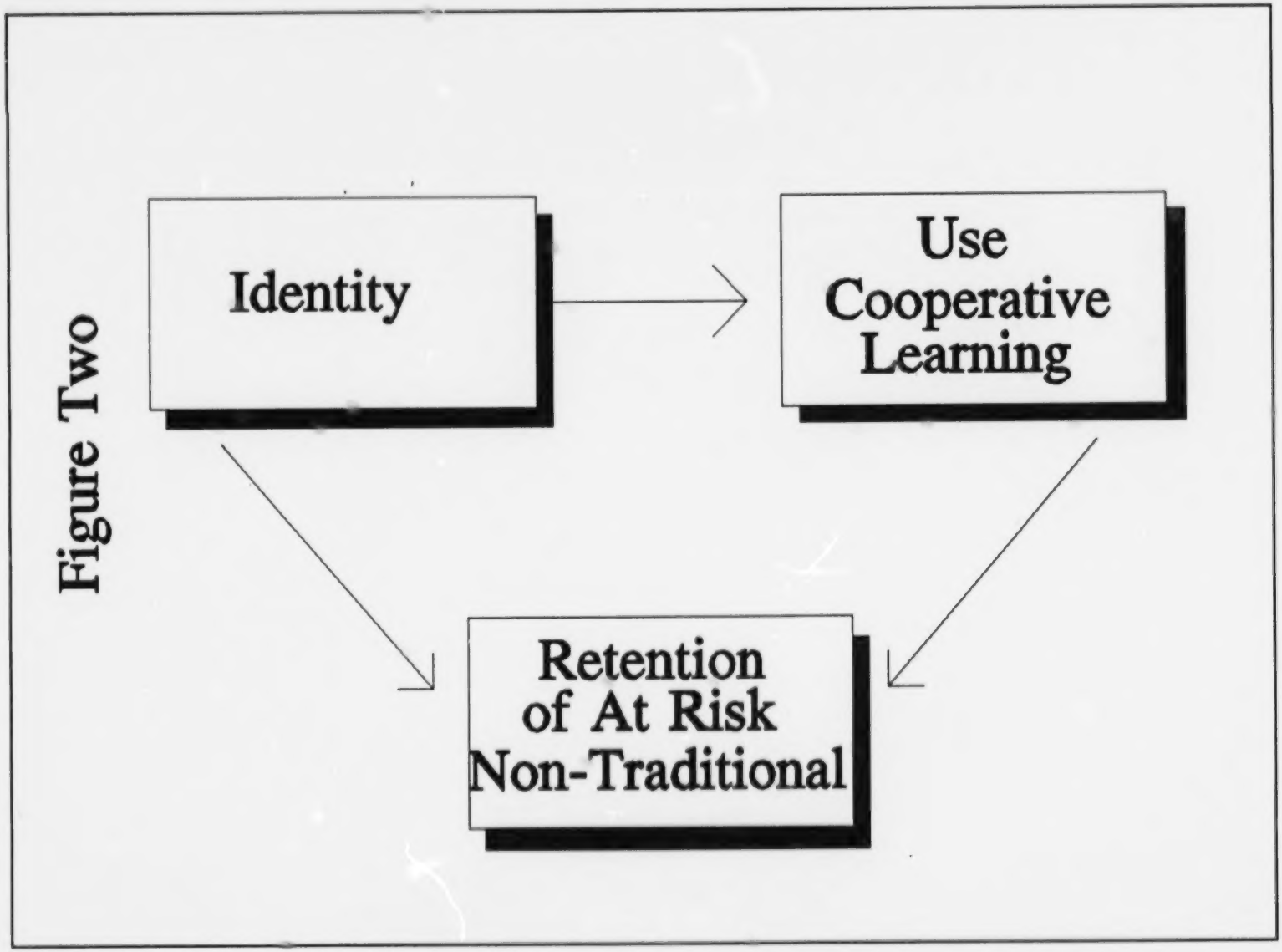
Identity
Use Cooperative Learning
Retention of At Risk Non-Traditional

Figure Two

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